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SUBJECT: EXPERTS DOUBT NIYAZOV'S GRAND "TURKMEN LAKE" PROJECT WILL  
COME TO FRUITION

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Turkmenistan's plan to construct a man-made lake in the desert to collect agricultural run-off water, initiated under former President Niyazov, is both ambitious and controversial. It has triggered fears of long-term ecological implications throughout Central Asia. Although President Berdimuhamedov appears to be continuing the project, he has avoided publicity on progress of the construction. Experts, both local and international, doubt the Turkmen Lake project will ever come to fruition. Berdimuhamedov appears to be well aware of the lake's drawbacks, including its potential to become a source of friction in future years with Uzbekistan. Our assessment is that until the government discovers how to exit from a project that does not make sense, it may remain on autopilot -- moving mechanically forward, but at a snail's pace. END SUMMARY.

#### HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

¶3. (SBU) Central Asia's growing population and old-fashioned, wasteful irrigation techniques have resulted in greater competition for water in Central Asia. This is especially true in Turkmenistan, the driest of the five Central Asian nations. To confront its own water challenges, the Government of Turkmenistan in October 2002 launched an ambitious, controversial twenty-year project to create a gigantic man-made lake in the Karashor Depression in northwestern Turkmenistan. According to local press reports, the Golden Age ("Altyn Asyr"), or Turkmen Lake was to encompass 3,460 square kilometers, and was to be filled with agricultural waste water from the country's agricultural zones.

#### TWO COMPETING SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

¶4. (SBU) Turkmenistan's government has argued that building the lake will help to reuse the runoff and at the same time improve water quality in the Amu Darya, the largest river in Central Asia, which flows through eastern Turkmenistan. Paltamed Esenov, Director of the Desert Institute under the Ministry of Nature Protection of Turkmenistan, said about eight billion cubic meters of water polluted with agricultural chemicals enters the Amu Darya every year and is the primary cause of salinity and land degradation

downstream. Officials have estimated that up to ten billion cubic meters of water is lost through irrigation each year, but the lake could provide an alternative to the Amu Darya, and would reduce water logging and other degradation to the land.

15. (SBU) However, international experts have expressed serious concern that the lake would reduce the volume of the Amu Darya, and ultimately of the Aral Sea, where the water volume has already shrunk some 90 percent, to 115 billion cubic meters. Vladimir Dukhovny, director of the Tashkent-based Central Asian Institute for Water Issues, downplayed concerns. "Turkmenistan can't get any more water than agreements permit." (NOTE: According to an interstate agreement signed in the early 1990's by the countries through which the Amu Darya flows, Turkmenistan's share of river water is 21.4 billion cubic meters. END NOTE.)

16. (SBU) In theory, the plan to fill the lake with runoff means that the lake should not need extra water from the Amu Darya River or any other source. However, critics of the plan doubt that runoff water alone would be sufficient to fill the lake, and they worry that additional water would have to be diverted from the Amu Darya. A local water specialist who works for the agency responsible for designing the Turkmen Lake, the Turkmen Water Research and Engineering Institute (please protect), confirmed that there is not enough drainage water to send to the lake. According to the specialist, most farm fields are not designed to promote drainage of irrigation water and much is lost through evaporation. Existing agricultural drainage channels also frequently become clogged with silt and other detritus. The contact said that in Lebap province the Water Ministry has diverted water from the Amu Darya in the past to speed the water flow into the main drainage system. The specialist questioned the lake project's water-saving value.

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17. (SBU) According to EU-TACIS Country Representative Michael Wilson (please protect), Turkmen Lake is likely to have only a modestly positive effect on drainage, and would actually damage the environment, because pollution would not be eliminated, but rather, just be relocated from one area to another. Wilson added that the technology to be used for building the 720-kilometer trans-national drainage canal that will transport water to the lake is "primitive" because it will not include any filtration measures. Wilson also warned that the cost of infrastructure and necessary nature protection measures would make the project financially impractical.

"OUR LAKE WILL WORK"

18. (SBU) Such arguments did not stop Niyazov from going ahead with the project. Initially, the cost of the project spread over twenty years was estimated at \$4.5 billion, but Niyazov -- wanting to double wheat and cotton crops -- in 2003 agreed to increase the investment to \$8-10 billion to complete his lake by 2010. To that end, he signed multi-million-dollar contracts with Case, Caterpillar and Komatsu companies for hundreds of heavy-duty earthmoving equipment.

BERDIMUHAMEDOV REMAINING LOW KEY ABOUT THE PROJECT

19. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov appears to be committed to promoting his predecessor's plans for the lake project. The government has continued to purchase additional heavy equipment for the project, recently signing a long-term agreement for 200 pieces of Komatsu equipment to be delivered annually for the next seven years in support of the lake's construction. Nevertheless, he has avoided making public statements about the lake and has raised the project only once, in an April 4, 2008 congratulatory letter to the personnel of the Ministry of Water.

110. (SBU) COMMENT: Experts, both local and international, doubt the Turkmen Lake project will ever come to fruition. Local observers believe the construction of the Turkmen Lake was Niyazov's fantasy raised to the rank of national project. Most people we talked with seem to believe that Berdimuhamedov is well aware of the lake's drawbacks, including its potential to become a source of friction in future years with Uzbekistan, the next downstream user. As with so

many of Niyazov's brainchildren, however, the challenge for Berdimuhamedov's government is how to exit gracefully from a project that does not make sense, and until Berdimuhamedov is prepared to focus on that challenge, the project may remain on autopilot -- moving mechanically forward, but at a snail's pace. END COMMENT.

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